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The Sorcerer of Darkstone Tower

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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THE SORCERER OF DARKSTONE TOWER

by Mitchell Diamond



Being a peasant wasn't so bad, thought Carik as he walked down a dusty road to the town of Lanthor. They had to wake up frightfully early, and work frightfully late, but at least no one was trying to kill them. The road wound through well-tended fields of tall wheat waving under the blue summer sky, past the straw-thatched huts of peasants and stick-fenced barnyards where they kept cows and goats. The sun was warm on Carik's broad shoulders, and the breeze was cool through his curly brown hair.

A month before he had walked down the same road, but had presented a vastly different sight. He had been wearing a hauberk of steel rings, the armor was stained with his own dry blood. His boots were worn, his strong arms were wrapped with clumsy bandages. He had been hungry, thirsty, and weary. He had been a sword-bearer in those days, a Hero.

Young Carik had been a Hero, though not a very successful one. Upon his seventeenth year he had left his home in far-away, peaceful Uree Valley to make his fortune in the wild world. He found the wild world to be wild indeed, beyond all the tales of his grandfather Ragnor. Carik had been dogged by ill-fortune from the moment he left the valley. He had nearly been killed by the Ogre of Blackleaf Forest, escaping death by pummeling only when the brute tripped over a tree root and broke its neck. Made bold by his partial success, he had ventured to pilfer the hoard of the Dragon of Widdenoll. Once again he escaped, as the dragon vented its wrath on the village. But his success had been short-lived, for he had been robbed of his treasure by a band of goblins along the road to Lanthor, barely escaping with his life. He found there were many evil creatures in the wild world, and none of them gave up their wealth easily. And Beautiful Maidens in Peril were rare, at least in his part of the world. Thinking back on the old days, he was amazed to find himself alive at all, regardless of how poor he was. Now he wore only a dagger in his belt, and hid the sword his grandfather had given him under his bed. These days he lived and worked in Lanthor, and thoughts of dragons, ogres and beautiful maidens were kept far away.

Lanthor was a prosperous town, if a small one. The Lord of Lanthor preferred the far-away pleasures in the Royal Court of East Allnar to the abuse of his peasants, and left his small domain to its business. Carik's own business was at the town alehouse, the Fullpot.

Carik emptied the pots. The alehouse master was a thin, mournful man called Rakmer. Why he was so mournful Carik still didn't know; the Fullpot was the only alehouse in Lanthor, and thus did very good business. Carik earned only a few coppers each month, but had a small room in the attic and was never short of food. It was far from the life of glory and

wealth he had once dreamed of, but it was far safer than Heroing.

Carik waved to a few townsmen that hurried along the winding cobble-stone streets, then leapt nimbly away from a rattling, horse-drawn wagon. By the time he had finished shouting choice descriptions of the reckless driver, his family and his horse, he was opening the door of the Fullpot. He paused and breathed deeply of the rich ale smell, and the sweet aroma of wine.

"Wake up!" shouted Rakmer from the kitchen. "There's tables to wash, pots to scrub! It will be busy soon!" A stained apron came flying from the lamp-lit gloom to settle over Carik's head. He sighed and pulled on the apron. At least no one had ever been killed cleaning pots.

It was a long hard night for Carik, as most of them were. He had already collected the scattered ale mugs and wine jugs, piling them high in the big kitchen washtubs. Now he sat sipping at a half empty mug of ale himself, waiting for the last patrons to make their way home, or to their rooms upstairs, or to the dark street. Then he would wash the tables and scrub the floors. He hoped none of the men who sat cradling their heads in their hands would be sick. Rakmer would be insulted, and the floor was filthy enough.

The door opened, and the cool night air momentarily blew away the reek of sour, ale-thick breath and smoke. A few heads stirred, then settled back down on the sticky tables. With the breeze was a man.

Carik looked at him sullenly; he didn't want any more work that night. The traveler pulled back the hood of his dark cloak, revealing a serious-looking young face whose straight black hair hung to his shoulders. He was slender; a sword-belt pulled his black tunic close around his narrow waist. A heavy broadsword hung from the belt. Carik's eyes narrowed. He noticed such things, for one of his duties was to keep order in the drinking house. If the stranger intended mischief, Carik's usual oaken club would not serve here. The fellow exchanged a few soft words with Rakmer, and the sorry-looking innkeeper poured a mug of ale. To Carik's discomfort and surprise the stranger walked directly to where Carik was sitting watching him. Carik saw the face was even younger than he had guessed, younger even than his own twenty-odd winters. They stared at each other a moment; the stranger's eyes were deep and black and held Carik's without blinking.

"You are Carik of Uree," he said finally. Carik nodded, not speaking but thinking furiously. He wondered if he had given out the name of his homeland to anyone. If any of the villagers of Widdenoll (which used to lie only a few leagues from Lanthor) chanced to survive the dragon's fire, they might remember the young Hero and his boasts of dragon-slaying. Carik's hand strayed to the dagger he kept under his

apron, and he hoped Rakmer was watching. But the fellow gestured to the chair across the table, and sat down at Carik's nod. Carik hoped the relief didn't show in his face-- it would be hard for the stranger to wield a sword while sitting down.

"I am Yorman of Akuthar," revealed the stranger. Carik leaned forward, for the name Akuthar was well known in the world of Sorcery. "I have need of a sword, and a strong arm to wield it."

"You have a sword," ventured Carik carefully, "and two arms of your own."

"One sword cannot defeat an army," said Yorman.

"Neither can two," pointed out Carik. He was never much of a hero, but he had at least learned not to be a fool.

"But two swords may slay a magician."

"Go on," said Carik. He would later regret those two words.

The very next day Carik and the young Akuthar were trudging down the road from Lanthor. They headed south; towards the rising peaks of the Elstain Mountains, the great range that stretched across the face of the world from the Sea of Allnar and east to the cold, unmapped Wild Northlands. But the road took them through the gentle lands of East Allnar; past the fields of Lanthor and clustered peasant villages, through orchards of apple trees, and over an occasional babbling stream on rattling wooden bridges. Once again Carik wore his scimitar, though he had long since sold his fine hauberk of mail (he was hungry at the time, and couldn't eat it) and now wore only a jerkin of leather over his clothes. His scimitar, a few provisions and dagger hung from his belt. Yorman wore only his dark cloak and broadsword. They were not prepared for a long journey.

The day wore on, the sun passed its height and started falling into the west, the jagged peaks of the Elstains rose tall on the far horizon. The wind turned cool, the peasant-fields and flower-strewn meadows gave way to wild grasslands, abandoned fields and shadowy thickets of beeches and elms. Carik's feet began to ache, and he began to wonder where they were going, and how far away it was. Then he wondered what they would find when they got there, and what would happen once they found it. Yorman had talked much during the day, but said little about the task he had in mind. His tales had concerned the deeds of his family-- the names Akuthar, Ankzem, Yizkor and Durun and their wonders had wearied Carik's ears until he hardly listened.

"Where are we going?" asked Carik suddenly, interrupting a story about how old Ankzem Akuthar, Yorman's great grandfather, had faced the dragon Gorgin the Horrendous. "And why didn't we buy horses?"

"We don't need horses," said Yorman. "We march for perhaps two days, and have little to carry. Besides, horses are hard to conceal."

"Conceal? Conceal from whom? Besides, a fast horse is a warrior's best weapon, my grandfather used to say. If things go ill for us, they would make for a more speedy escape!"

"Escape? Ha!" laughed Yorman. "If things go ill for us, we shall not escape. Nothing escapes the Kaldaashan wizard!"

"Wizard?" exclaimed Carik, "I thought we were after a magician!"

"Wizard, magician, they are all the same to an Akuthar," answered Yorman.

"There is a difference to me," said Carik sullenly. "Who do you mean to slay?"

"It was some sixty years ago," began the young Akuthar (Carik groaned but Yorman ignored him), "an evil sorcerer came out of the grim southern lands of Kaldaash. Envious of the glory and wealth of the Akuthars, he made war upon us. Again and again he was defeated and driven from our walls, for my father Yizkor was a great Arch-Sorcerer in his own right. When last he assailed us, my good brother Durun wreaked havoc on his armies with his wizardry, while my father brewed a great sorcery that would have ended the evil sorcerer's career once and for all. At that moment..." Yorman paused and looked southwards to the mountains. His dark eyes were serious, his voice grim.

"At that moment Castle Akuthar was swallowed by the earth. My brother and a few of our captains escaped, but my father perished, along with all his magicks, deep under a mountain of rubble. I wasn't there at the time, or doubtless I would have perished myself. It is revenge I seek, revenge against the foul Arch-Sorcerer Rastengeld!" Yorman turned to Carik, but found himself standing alone. Carik was standing a few paces behind him, his mouth hanging open in astonishment.

"Rastengeld?" gasped Carik finally. "You mean for us to challenge the Arch-Sorcerer Rastengeld?" Even Carik had heard about the terrible Kaldaashan sorcerer; told in hushed voices at the Full pot, with lamps dark, as if he might suddenly appear in a puff of smoke and turn them all into toads. Unlike most sorcerers who hid themselves in their high towers and studied ancient tomes of lore, Rastengeld controlled a powerful army. He kept the country side in fear, and it was said he controlled even Lord Musfuntan himself. Fear of Rastengeld was why Lord Musfuntan stayed far from his domains.

"Are you mad?" shouted Carik when he had found his tongue. "He destroys your entire family, an Arch-Sorcerer included, and your Castle, and you think you can walk right up to him and stick him with your stupid sword? Have you got an army? You can't even afford a horse!" Yorman opened his mouth, but Carik wasn't finished yet. "Kill a magician you said. Split up the booty evenly, you said. By the Blade of my Grandfather, what were you thinking? Were you thinking at all, I wonder?" Carik moaned aloud at the sudden reverse in his fortunes. A few days ago he had a job, a warm bed, and plenty to eat. Now he was following a fool to challenge a fearsome Arch-Sorcerer, right in front of all his armies, right in the dire fastness of Darkstone Tower. And to make matters worse, Carik had sold his armor. He sat down in the dust of the road and glared at Yorman.

In a chamber high atop the black pinnacle of Darkstone Tower, Rastengeld sat upon his ivory throne. His long, thin fingers caressed the page of the massive tome on his lap as he

read. His midnight-black eyes gleamed from his gaunt face, a face whose yellowed, parchment-like skin was stretched tight over his bones. He was bald, making his visage appear more as a skull than a living human face. Dead-black robes hung limply over his sparse, boney frame; black robes trimmed with gold-- the robes of an Arch-Sorcerer.

As he read, Rastengeld lifted his hand and raised a long, pointed finger. The door to the chamber swung silently open. A hunched man, clad from head to foot in a dark cloak, stepped hesitantly into the chamber. Rastengeld lowered his finger, and the door swung shut. His eyes never left the page.

Dirt the Spy stepped into his master's chamber on soft, noiseless shoes. He was a small, thin man, a man who could nearly slip through cracks under doors, a man who could hide in a shadow, and listen to a whispered conversation from across a noisy alehouse. He was a man of the Inland Hills, where intrigue and stealth were as natural as war and hate.

The spy noiselessly crossed the floor and stood before the marble steps of Rastengeld's throne. He bowed low before his master, it was as much as a cringe as a bow. Rastengeld read on.

Dirt glanced about, moving only his eyes and forcing his body to remain perfectly still. The two torches that flanked Rastengeld's throne threw light to golden platters set on the walls, golden platters that held the severed heads of Rastengeld's enemies. The dead faces all held grimaces of terrible agony. The platter closest to Rastengeld's throne, though, was empty. Dirt swallowed and waited in silence, not daring to move or speak. At long last Rastengeld sighed and softly closed the book. The sorcerer looked at Dirt as though he was a hideous-looking morsel of food that nevertheless might be worth a bite.

"Do you know what this is, Dirt?" asked Rastengeld finally, his pointed finger resting on the cover of the massive tome on his lap.

"I believe it is a book, master," answered Dirt, his voice naturally soft from years spent whispering.

"And do you know whose Book this is?" asked Rastengeld, his voice as pleasant as a cat's purr. Dirt swallowed nervously. Of course he knew, for Rastengeld had gloated about it often enough. It was the Book of Sorcery stolen from the ruins of Akuthar Castle. But a successful, and long-lived, thief and spy such as Dirt knew that a clever tongue was as important as steady hands.

"It is your Book, master."

"Why, so it is! Very good!" Dirt smiled in the shadows of his dark hood, for Rastengeld was pleased. "But do you know whose Book this was, before it was mine?" Dirt knew, and he also knew that the truthful answer was not always the correct one. If Rastengeld wished to gloat again, Dirt would not stop him.

"No, master," answered Dirt softly.

"It was the Book of the Akuthars! It is the very Book of Sorcery once possessed by old Ankzem Dragonbane! I myself pried it from Yizkor Akuthar's cold fingers! And do you know who killed him?"

"No master," answered Dirt. Rastengeld frowned. "Yes, master," added the spy quickly. "You killed him! Everyone in the Four Kingdoms knows that!" Rastengeld smiled, and Dirt let out a long, inaudible sigh of relief.

"Very good, Dirt!" exclaimed Rastengeld. "Now, do you see that empty platter hanging there?"

"No mast...,uh, yes master!"

"Do you know whose head I wished to hang there?"

"The Akuthar's" guessed Dirt. Under his hood, beads of sweat rolled down his unwashed face.

"Correct! But alas, poor Yizkor's head was crushed to jelly when his castle fell down around him. Careless of me! So I cannot hang his head upon my wall. But having an empty platter on my wall makes me sad, very sad. I dislike it. Why, I dislike it nearly as much as being disturbed while I am reading!" Rastengeld looked to the empty platter, to Dirt, and began tapping his long, thin finger on the cover of the book. Dirt shivered and shook, and wondered how his head was going to look hanging on Rastengeld's wall. Then he remembered why he was there. Dirt could think under pressure, that was why he was still alive.

"I have news," he said.

"You had best," answered Rastengeld coldly, with a meaningful glance at his walls. "One does not trouble Rastengeld with trifles!" That was true, thought Dirt, one of the heads on the walls had done just that.

"The son of the Akuthar is coming," Dirt whispered, and waited for a response. He was not disappointed. Rastengeld froze on his ivory throne, his eyes narrowed to points of dark fire, his face twisted into a pale mask of rage.

"Durun!" cried Rastengeld. "How could such a thing escape my vision?" Rastengeld clenched his fists in rage, and remembered all that he had suffered at the hands of the Akuthars. Old Yizkor had almost ruined him, sending sorcerous fire into Rastengeld's very halls. Rastengeld had nearly been burned to a cinder, sitting in that very chair, while his will was far away undermining the foundations of Akuthar Castle. As it was, his tower had been gutted and his servants slain. Durun was much like his father, and who knew what secrets the Akuthar possessed? What kind of magicks had Durun rescued from his castle, and now intended to wield against his father's slayer? Rastengeld's pleasant mood churned into fury and fear.

"How many men does he have with him?" demanded Rastengeld. "How far away is he? Is he equipped for a siege? Do the King's Knights ride with him?" Dirt smiled at his master's discomfort, a sinister smile of rotted, yellow teeth.

"Only one man marches with Yorman Akuthar, a servant from an alehouse in Lanthor. They are not equipped for a siege. There are no Knights from the King with them." The spy smiled, even as his heart shook. He would either be rewarded or annihilated. His life was not easy. Rastengeld suddenly laughed; it was a wicked sound, but Dirt was pleased. The Arch-Sorcerer tossed his spy a sack of coins.

"Yorman is it?" laughed Rastengeld. "Young, foolish Yorman! The dolt seeks to challenge me! Wonderful! I shall

soon have an Akuthar head to grace my walls!" As he laughed, Rastengeld considered having the spy slain in some terrible manner for playing him the fool. And perhaps he would later, but right at the moment he was in fine spirits.

"Have Musfuntan's men capture him. Have them take care, for the boy may know some tricks. And have them take care not to damage his head!"

"How many men?" asked the spy. "He is an Akuthar."

"He is a whelp. And a fool," replied Rastengeld. The Arch-Sorcerer thought for a moment. "Have his companion slain," he added. Then he dismissed his favorite spy with a wave of his hand. In the blink of an eye the spy was gone. The air inside the chamber was fresher, like a summer breeze blowing away the stench of a rotted corpse. Rastengeld sat back on his throne and thought about how well things were going. Life, indeed, was wonderful.

"Listen," said Yorman, holding his hand to his ear, "someone is pissing in a chamberpot. Go empty it, Carik!" They stood in the middle of the road and glared at each other. Both their faces were flushed red, for they had been arguing for some time.

"I will," promised Carik, "and I will be emptying chamberpots long after you are so much dust in the wind!" Carik turned to make his way back to Lanthor. This was a fool's errand, and he had done enough foolish things in his life. Ignoring Yorman's taunts, he took a dozen determined steps down the road before he heard the pounding of horses. He looked up and saw a group of horsemen sweeping over a hill and bearing down on him. The late-noon sun glinted off their long lances and mail hauberks of fine Allnarian steel. As they neared, Carik could make out a Black Hawk emblem on their round shields. Men from Musfuntan. The riders lowered their lances level with Carik's chest. Carik turned and fled across the fields towards a grove of trees. Yorman was a step behind.

The Four Kingdoms of Allnar had been inhabited for many generations. Hardy, rugged men of ages past had crossed the great Elstain Mountains to flee the ruin of the Lost Kingdom of Ulzallan. Centuries later, the Legion of Heros from legendary Zangaria had marched to the northlands, making war with Slayer the Mace-Wielder and the Goblin-King Gomm-Kaar. Many of those blonde-haired men desired the lands they found and stayed to found the Four Kingdoms of Allnar. Thus the lands had been under plow for many years and the once-mighty forests cleared to make room for fields of barley, corn and wheat. Carik and Yorman didn't have a mighty forest in which to lose themselves, only a sorry-looking grove of young birch and elm trees.

The soldiers split up; three jumped off their horses and ran into the trees after Carik and Yorman, three more rode to the other side of the grove to cut off their escape.

"You want to slay sorcerers," gasped Carik as they darted around trees and jumped over fallen logs, "but you can't even handle a few men!" The soldiers were gaining on them-- the soldiers were fresh, and Carik and Yorman had been marching and arguing much of the day. Carik stopped and decided to fight, for running deeper into the grove would only bring them closer to the soldiers on the other side.

"Draw your sword!" he called to his companion, and turned and drew his scimitar in one smooth motion. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Yorman tugging at his broadsword. With the trouble the young Akuthar was having getting his weapon out of his scabbard, he knew they were in serious trouble.

Two soldiers went after the taller and brawnier Carik, while one aimed his sword at Yorman. The riders were armored in the knee-length chainmail hauberks of Allnarian warriors; their helms were steel, and hung with camail that protected their necks and shoulders. They wielded long, straight, wide-bladed swords: not as heavy as Yorman's weapon, but well able to snap Carik's slender scimitar in two.

The soldiers hacked at Carik and tried to flank him. They were grim, bearded and silent, and both were skilled swordsmen. Though their blades were heavier and slower than Carik's, Carik's lunges and ripostes were easily deflected. The clash of steel on steel sent numbing jolts up his arm. Carik didn't try to stand up to them, but backed constantly away and tried to keep the evening sun in their eyes. It was his grandfather's advice, and the only bit of the old man's sword-lore he could remember at the moment. But it was difficult to do in the shady grove.

The two swordsmen came on, their blades seeking a momentary lapse in Carik's defense to kill him. Carik took another step back, and suddenly the trunk of an elm tree protected his side. He seized the instant to face one of his attackers. He parried the soldier's blow, redirecting the blade instead of trying to stop it. His scimitar flashed in a swift riposte that the soldier's heavy sword couldn't hope to parry, and slashed the soldier from belly to chest. The soldier gasped, but his mail saved his vitals. Carik cursed, then ducked as the soldier's sword swept over his head. The sword bit deep into the tree. Carik's blade came up like a striking serpent, the thrust went deep into the soldier's eye and he crashed to the ground. Carik pulled his sword free and leapt over the fallen man in the same instant, and felt the other soldier's sword graze his back, neatly cutting his leather jerkin.

Carik heard the ring of steel as Yorman traded blows with the remaining soldier, and heard the shouts of the other riders as they hurried to the aid of their comrades. Then Carik gave his attention to the man trying to kill him.

The soldier charged, swinging his blade in smooth, wide arcs. Carik jumped nimbly out of the way. It took an instant for the more heavily armored soldier to change his direction, and in that instant Carik threw his fate to chance and thrust straight at his chest. It was a lucky blow, his point split a steel ring, and the man joined his comrade on the cool forest ground. Carik wrenched his blade free, his eyes transfixed by the bright red blood over shining steel. He heard nothing but the shudder of the soldier's final breath-- a gentle gasp as life left him cold. The ring of swords and shouts of soldiers were drowned out in the quiet whisper of death. A trickle of red blood ran from the dead lips. Carik eyes were drawn to the blood on his sword-- old Ragnor had taught him well. Then Yorman's desperate shout stirred Carik's thoughts, and he hurried to his friend's aid.

Somehow the young Akuthar had managed to foil the blows of his opponent with clumsily swung parries of his heavy broadsword. The soldier had forced Yorman against a tree, and was doing his best to disarm him. Carik stepped forward quietly, meaning to stab upwards under the camail that protected the man's neck. It was a good, if unheroic, idea. It would have worked, if a sudden shout from the soldier's nearby companions had not warned him. The soldier spun around, swinging his blade in a complete circle and knocking Carik's sword clean from his hand with a ringing clash of steel. The soldier's next blow would have cut Carik in half, had not Yorman taken that moment to make his only effective blow of the melee. His sweeping sword sent the soldier's head flying from his shoulders-- helm, camail and all. Carik stooped for his blade, and in that moment the forest blazed with a blinding flash of light.

When Carik could see again, he found Yorman knocking the other soldiers senseless with the flat of his sword. It wasn't too difficult, as the men were crawling about on their knees, their blinded eyes full of tears.

"A bit of Akuthar sorcery," said Yorman smugly, as Carik wiped tears from his own eyes. "I only needed a moment or two to cast it. It will take more than a few men to keep an Akuthar from his vengeance!"

"Very nice," agreed Carik, "and a nice bit of sword-play too, although it was impossible." Yorman fidgeted under Carik's stare.

"The blade has a bit of an enchantment on it," admitted the young Akuthar. "My brother Durun did it for me. He is a worthy enchanter, deeply learned in the arts of sorcery. Though my father could have done a much better job if he were still alive."

"Enchanted swords and light spells aside," said Carik as he wiped blood from his blade, "it will be impossible to get near Rastengeld now, he knows we are coming!" Carik waved at the prone bodies as proof.

"Fear not," answered Yorman with a grin, "for I have a plan!"

Under the red sky of dusk two soldiers rode up to the gate of Darkstone Tower. The massive, black iron portcullis rose slowly on rattling chains, and the two horsemen rode in under the great stone walls. The captain of the guard met them on the other side; a squat, thickly muscled man whose black beard was marred by a scar that ran from his chin to his ear. He looked at the two weary riders with shrewd dark eyes, his fingers tapping on the hilt of the short sword at his side. The riders had little to report but their names. The captain looked at them scornfully and shook his head.

"Nothing, eh? They got away from you, eh? Bah, Musfuntan is a fool, and his men are blundering idiots! Well, you had best think of something to say, for Master Rastengeld wishes to see you immediately!" The captain grinned wolfishly, relishing the bad news. "Next time you'll do better, if you have a next time!"

"We serve Lord Musfuntan, not the Master of Darkstone," replied the larger of the two riders. The captain

sneered and snapped his thick fingers. Four large figures suddenly loomed from the shadows under the walls.

"Master Rastengeld will see you-- now!" sneered the captain as the four warriors surrounded the horsemen. Each was nearly as tall as the taller rider, and each was more heavily muscled. They wore hard leather hauberks with blackened steel studs that gleamed like dark stars. The two riders shivered, and held their tongues. They were krollin warriors, the huge, fierce war-loving folk from the southern lands of Urgench. The kroll's heavy swords were yet in their scabbards, but their thick hands twitched with desire to draw them. Krollin were fearsome fighters, and they forged their own weapons. The larger the krollin, the larger the sword. The terrible Kroll Kings of Urgench wielded weapons that two ordinary men could hardly lift. But these four were enough to cow the two riders. They slid meekly from their horses and fell in between the hulking krolls. They were marched to the high tower that loomed above in the darkness like a great mountain-god of stone.

Darkstone Tower was well named, for it was built of black rock. Which god or demon laid the stones for the massive foundations no one remembered; what great battles it had seen in the ages before memory no one knew. But it was Rastengeld who cleaned the dust from those foundation stones, and his slaves and his sorcery that piled the high walls and towers upon them. The great tower-keep stood nearly three hundred feet tall, from far away Carik had thought it one of the peaks of the Elstains. Now, as he was marched through the gloomy halls lit occasionally by smoking torches, he wished he was far away. He wished he had never come to the Tower, wished he had never met Yorman Akuthar, wished he had not quit his job in Lanthor, and wished, finally, that he had never left his father's fields in peaceful, far-away Uree Valley. He was too terrified to even think of escape.

Somewhere in the tower men and krollin ate and drank together in boisterous company, the halls echoed with the din of feasting warriors. Occasionally the scream of a ravished serving wench filled the halls, followed by the fierce, lustful laughter of men and krolls. Carik felt sweat trickle down his back under the stolen armor. He could feel the eyes of the two krolls behind him boring into his back, hoping that he would reach for his sword. He kept his hands at his sides and his eyes on the krolls that led them. Things are not looking good, thought Carik miserably.

As they climbed a narrow, winding stairway Carik began to wonder how they would die. It would take only a few moments for the dark sorcerer to penetrate their crude disguises, and then they would be finished. Blasted out of existence by sorcerous flame, or turned into newts and frogs and fed to snakes? His mind filled with the endless varieties his doom could take. The stairs seemed endless, and he grew more terrified with each step.

Yorman suddenly stopped and turned to the krolls behind them. Carik's heart leapt to his mouth, he knew the krolls were just waiting for them to do something foolish to justify hacking them into bits. In a flash the krolls had their swords half from their scabbards, savage grins twisted their brutish faces.



"Are you tired?" asked the Akuthar, in a voice that sounded tired itself. Yorman stared deep into the beady eyes of the krolls as he spoke, his own eyes wide and unblinking. "Are you not weary? Tiirreeed?" he repeated, drawing the word out endlessly. "Two of you should be enough to guide my comrade and I the long, long rest of the way. And you two have done much, much, much, much more than enough already. You deserve your drink and rest many, many, many, many, many times over." Yorman's voice was becoming monotonous, one of the krolls blinked and yawned. The other looked drowsy, and their sword slipped from their fingers back into their scabbards. Yorman suddenly put a hand on the chest of each of the enchanted krolls and shoved as hard as he could. They tumbled like corpses down the stone steps.

The krolls leading them were not affected by Yorman's enchantment at all. They drew their swords; heavy, terrible-looking weapons with jagged teeth along the edges. Carik's big boot kicked the legs out from under one of the krolls as the brute aimed a decapitating blow at Yorman, and he was just able to get his sword out in the cramped stairway and deflect the other kroll's powerful stroke. The blow nearly knocked the stolen broadsword from Carik's hands; it would have easily snapped his lighter scimitar. As the two krolls concentrated on Carik, Yorman finally brought his weapon into the fray. In two lightning-swift slashes it cut through the hard hauberks of the krolls, and they tumbled down the bloody steps to join their comrades.

"That was a clever bit of wizardry, and a good blade work too!" said Carik. "Now to escape!" He turned to run down the stairs. He made one step before Yorman grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

"Rastengeld is this way," hissed Yorman, and he started running up the stairs. Carik groaned, then followed. They charged up the stairs in a jingle of mail, knowing they would have little time before the dead krolls on the stairs were discovered. The narrow stairway ended before a dark door flanked by smoking torches. They stopped abruptly and crept

forward in silence. Carik measured the door with his eyes, then took a deep breath and readied his sword.

"Stand back!" hissed Carik as he prepared to hurl himself forward. "By the Iron Fist of Kullzak, this door won't stop me!" Yorman's hand grabbed his arm just before he charged.

"By all your iron-headed gods!" whispered Yorman into his ear. "Sheath your blade, you witless sword-swinger!"

"What do we do?" whispered back Carik.

"We shall slay a sorcerer by sorcery!" said Yorman. "You go first..."

"What?"

"...and distract him while I cast a spell."

"And if your spell fails, and he turns me into dust, what will you do then?" demanded Carik.

"Join you, of course," answered Yorman. Carik bit his lip and reluctantly sheathed his sword. He didn't like the idea, but unfortunately it seemed fair. Yorman turned to one of the foully-reeking torches. They were of dark wood soaked in pitch, and set in black iron scones forged in the form of long bone-like arms with taloned hands. Yorman stared at the flickering flame for a long moment, then reached up. Carik's eyes widened, and before he could move Yorman put his naked hand into the flame.

When Yorman withdrew his hand he was holding a blazing ball of dancing red fire.

"Go now!" hissed the Akuthar through clenched teeth. Carik nodded and turned to the door, but he also slipped his dagger from his sheath and held it close against his wrist. He was impressed by Yorman's sorcery, but there was something about the way the young Akuthar was sweating that didn't inspire confidence.

Carik took a deep breath and lifted his hand, then the door swung open on its own accord. As if he was expected. Carik frowned, and forced his unwilling legs to march.

Carik tried to think of himself as a soldier making a report, not as a man about to die. He avoided looking at the ivory throne at the far end of the room, and looked at the walls instead. Anguished faces on severed heads looked back at him. Carik paled and turned away quickly. He took a long, shuddering breath to begin his story, then heard icy laughter that sent chills down his back. His tongue froze in his mouth.

"Welcome to Darkstone Tower, Carik of Lanthor! I hope you have had a pleasant journey here. But where is your friend Yorman the Doomed? Has he suddenly become shy? Or has he suddenly become wise, and fled?" Carik looked up into the mocking face of the old Arch-Sorcerer. The wicked humor in the cruel, gaunt face made his knees weaken. Only the fact that Rastengeld's black, piercing eyes held him frozen kept him from falling.

A ball of flame arced over Carik's head; the flame seemed a balled fist of living fire aimed at the sorcerer. Rastengeld lifted a thin, arched eyebrow, and calmly raised his long-fingered hand. The flame was sucked into his open palm and vanished. Rastengeld laughed.

"So he still remains! A brave youth, but a fool! Alas for Yorman, that I possess the Great Book of his father! Already I have mastered the simple tricks of fire!" Rastengeld laughed and rubbed his withered hands together.

Carik felt life flow back to his limbs as the spell of the old sorcerer's eyes was broken. He flung his dagger.

Rastengeld was swifter yet. His hand flew up, and the dagger vanished in a puff of black smoke. Rastengeld clucked his tongue, shook his skull-like head and smiled. With a scream of desperation Carik whipped out his sword and hurled himself at the Kaldaashan Arch-Sorcerer. Rastengeld pointed a long, thin finger, and the world around Carik vanished in thunder and light. When the swordsman finally reached the sorcerer, Rastengeld seemed to have grown a hundred times larger. Carik bounced off the old man's frail chest and fluttered about the room, a small black bird.

"Yorman!" called Rastengeld merrily. "Come see! Your friend has a form to match his brains!" Yorman burst into the room, his enchanted sword whirling and flashing like a thunderbolt. A bolt of red light sprang from Rastengeld's hand, and the sword exploded into a thousand glowing fragments. Yorman was flung against the wall. He lay there stunned as Carik fluttered about the room and cawed.

"Fear not, little bird," said Rastengeld kindly. The Kaldaashan held out his hand, and a small blue flame appeared on his palm. The fire grew into a blazing ball of flame. Rastengeld flipped it into the air and it immediately started chasing the bird. "You will not be a bird for long," laughed Rastengeld, "you will soon be ash!" Then he gave his attention to Yorman, who was stirring and groping feebly for his dagger. "As for you, rodent..." he began. Carik flew around the room once more, then bolted out the chamber's only window, flapping his little feathery wings as hard as he could. The ball of fire followed him.

Carik the Crow flew around the tower, looping and dodging in the air. The fire-ball grew ever closer. There were no trees he could hide in, and the lesser buildings of the

fortress were too far away to be of help. Fluttering madly, he flew around the tower and darted back in through the window.

Rastengeld stood before his throne, rubbing his thin hands together and laughing madly. A broom danced about the room by itself, swatting at a little, black mouse that ran helter-skelter across the floor. Carik flew directly at the sorcerer and scratched Rastengeld's smooth, bald head with his little clawed feet. Rastengeld looked up in surprise--and received the fire ball full in his face.

Rastengeld's head burst into flames--he shrieked very loudly, and only once. The sorcerous flame spread to Rastengeld's robes in an instant, even as he rolled about frantically on the floor. Finally he lay still and burned. The chamber filled with a foul, nauseating stench.

The mouse stopped well away from the burning Arch-Sorcerer. Squeak, squeak! it went. Caw, Caw! answered the crow angrily from its perch atop the ivory throne. Before the conversation could continue, armed men and krollin burst into the chamber, coughing and gagging in the smoke. The crow took a tiny, deep breath and swooped down, catching the mouse's tail in its clawed feet. Together they flew out the window, engaged in a violent cawing, squeaking debate.

CHILDHOOD'S END

by K. V. Skene

*Each yesterday
Ended when, quite magically,
The streetlights blinked, and once again
Bewitched the night.
Dark Pony waited; when play was done
I galloped my shadowy sleepmate
Through Everland.
The other side of life was real,
Behind the day it hid. Nightlights
Are bright enough
To see with new wide opened eyes
Clear down the road where ponies run
To childhood's end.*

*But that was then.
Now I endure long sleepless nights,
Curse the dead beds, too tired to break
The nightmare's hold.
No magic lantern rescues me,
I count each hour, wait and pray
For morning light.
Deliberately, I forgot that road
Where ponies once ran, young and free,
Long long ago.
Dark Pony run, don't wait for me
I grew too wise, closed both my eyes
At childhood's end.*